



METROPOLITAN PUBLIC DEFENDER MULTNOMAH COUNTY SECTION

To: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Public Safety
From: Sean Lo, Attorney, Metropolitan Public Defender
Date: May 10, 2021
Re: Support for House Bill 5030

Dear Co-Chairs Gorsek and Sollman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sean Lo, and I am an attorney at Metropolitan Public Defender's Multnomah County office and a proud AFSCME Local 3668 member. I have been a public defender in Portland since 2017 and I am testifying today in support of House Bill 5030. Specifically, I support the \$20 million investment in Oregon's public defense services that Governor Brown has called for in her Recommended Budget.

This investment would fund a holistic approach to public defense, which would include case managers to connect our clients with services, additional training and oversight for attorneys, caseload caps, and better pay for staff. Holistic support through an interdisciplinary defense team would allow my clients to access medication, treatment, counseling, and housing in order to address the underlying root causes of their involvement in the criminal justice system. This approach would ultimately save our state money, allowing Oregon to redirect those funds into crucial investments such as early learning education and addiction services.

Research is clear that this kind of support leads to better outcomes and reduces recidivism. This funding will fundamentally change, and save, countless lives and increase community safety.

Throughout my career in public defense, I have represented refugees, domestic violence survivors, single-mothers and fathers, veterans, those in recovery, people suffering from mental illness, the physically disabled, the houseless, the abused and abandoned, the young and old—all indigent. One of my first clients was a young, physically disabled, US veteran and marine, who had been struggling with depression and substance use related to service-induced trauma. A few months after I was court-appointed, he overdosed and passed away. I felt helpless because I simply did not have the resources to connect him with the addiction services he so desperately needed. Sadly, I would go on to lose two more clients under similar circumstances. Though each

client's passing was devastating, it was never a surprise given the lack of resources available to them.

As a misdemeanor attorney, I triaged a caseload of more than 200 clients at any given time, and its height, I had over 250 open cases. Each client was their own universe. Despite working overtime every day, and nearly every weekend, it was impossible to meet all their needs. Case caps and a dedicated caseworker would have made all the difference.

When I moved into the Minor Felony Unit, our office had obtained funding to hire two licensed clinical social workers to work on certain cases. Clients who accessed holistic services such as housing, substance use treatment, mental health and medical care, not only received better outcomes, but were also more likely to be released pre-trial and less likely to reoffend. In plain terms, they were more likely to experience justice and mercy.

For example, my most recent client was charged with felony theft crimes and was struggling with methamphetamine use and houselessness. He did not qualify for social services, but one of the caseworkers in our office volunteered to work with him anyway. She connected him with a recovery sponsor, helped him find a support group, and eventually connected him to a treatment provider. My client stopped using, got off the streets, and reconnected with his family, who were elated to see that he was finally taking steps to change his life. The victim, encouraged by my client's commitment to his recovery, eventually asked the court to dismiss the charges, to which the prosecutor did not object.

Although the outcome was ideal, it is more important to focus on the process that led to it. The \$20 million investment would allow more clients like him to access necessary services from compassionate providers, which in turn will result in better outcomes, meaningful healing and lasting community safety.

Therefore, I ask you to support House Bill 5030.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here this afternoon.